DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 543 CG 021 553

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TITLE Negotiating the Superwoman Minefield.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner) (051)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperation; *Employed Women; Family Life; *Females; Locus of Control; *Personality Traits; Self Esteem; *Stress Variables
IDENTIFIERS *Commitment

ABSTRACT

Many women today expect themselves to be everything to everybody, simultaneously meeting the expectations of the workplace and the family. This multifaceted lifestyle usually entails trying to meet incompatible demands with the unavoidable outcome of stress. Learning better ways of managing this stress is imperative for both health and happiness. Developing the trait of hardiness and working to replace cynicism with a more constructive, optimistic, and vital outlook seem to be central to more effective coping with stress. Individuals who demonstrate high levels of four personality characteristics (commitment, control, confidence, cooperation) have been found to withstand unusually high levels of life stress without becoming physically or psychologically compromised. Building a sense of commitment involves seeing the world as interesting and benign. It also requires clarifying one's values and resolving ambivalence about lifestyle choices. Enhancing a sense of control requires recognizing how personal choices dictate outcomes. Increasing confidence involves recognizing one's potential for coping and becoming more future- and change-oriented. Seeing change and new demands as potential adventure requires an ability to tolerate risk and failure. Increasing the level of cooperation within a family requires a climate of trust and caring. These suggested activities have worked for many women. (ABL)

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NEGOTIATING THE SUPERWOMAN MINEFIELD

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1989

Presented at the Pottstown Memorial Medical Center in Pottstown, PA

Many women today expect themselves to be everything to everybody, to simultaneously meet the expectations of the workplace and the family. As we struggle to advance our careers and affirm our devotion to our jobs, we're also still the primary source of nurturance within the family (we shoulder the main responsibility for providing &/or obtaining childcare and eldercare...we're considered remiss if we fail to listen to and support our partners or spouses). And, we bear primary responsibility for organizing, stocking, and cleaning the home.

This multifaceted lifestyle usually entails trying to meet incompatible demands...the unavoidable outcome: stress. Learning better ways of managing this stress is imperative for both our health and happiness. Tonight we'll look at some strategies that have helped many women cope more effectively.

Building Stress-Resistance
The development of strategies for managing stress

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How can women handle stressful events without becoming harmfully aroused and anxious? Developing the trait of HARDINESS and working to replace cynicism with a more constructive, optimistic, and vital outlook both seem to be central to more effective coping with stress. If you're under a lot of stress, a hardy personality and a positive, trusting outlook may do more for your health than even exercise or a strong constitution. Inner resources for managing stress can be improved in various ways. Development of these competencies can enhance productivity and satisfaction.

Building an orientation of Hardiness

The following descriptions of the components of hardiness will help you understand your objective more fully. Individuals who demonstrate high levels of these four personality characteristics have been found to withstand unusually high levels of life stress, without becoming physically or psychologically compromised. They seem to be people who in fact thrive under highly challenging circumstances that others might find overwhelming and crippling.

COMMITMENT- Commitment to self, work, family and other important values. It involves believing in the choices that you make about how to live your life, and seeing your life as meaningful. Commitment is the opposite of alienation.

CONTROL- A sense of personal control over one's life. Experiencing yourself as ultimately responsible for the shape of your life. The opposite is powerlessness or helplessness.

CONFIDENCE- The ability to perceive oneself as competent and see change in one's life as a challenge to master. The ability to see changes as developmental opportunities, rather than as threats to security.

COOPERATION- A mutual approach to solving problems, grounded in an awareness of and respect for others' needs. This includes a recognition of the fact that our lives are necessarily interdependent, and that it's impossible for anyone to "do it all" alone.

COMMITMENT
Methods for Change

Building a sense of COMMITMENT involves seeing the world as interesting and benign. It also requires clarifying your values and resolving ambivalence about lifestyle choices.

1. The first step is to develop a full sense of one's life choices. Many find it useful to engage in the following exercises designed to allow you to envision the possibilities your life offers by imagining all the alternatives available to you.

A. Focusing- Ask yourself: Where are you now?
What are you experiencing?
What is "right" in your life?
What gives you satisfaction?
What gives you pride?
Next, what feels "wrong"?
What often makes you angry?
What often makes you hurt?

B. Situational Reconstruction- Explore your options:
Where else could you be?
How could things be worse?
What shifts would be necessary?
How could things be better?
What shifts would be necessary?

2. Ambivalence and conflicting values make commitment difficult for many working women, especially those with children. Adherance to two sets of values that are incompatible creates stress and strain. For example, today, the importance placed on women's needs for self-fulfillment and equality is often in sharp conflict with the widely espoused ideas that young children need a mother at home and that a husband's success depends on the continual availability of a supportive and nurturant spouse. These cultural realities set the stage for self doubt and guilt for many women. For too long society has implied that wanting to combine parenting and employment is selfish, neglectful, and irresponsible. Women who believe they can't make it all work, may create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Developing a strong commitment to this lifestyle enables its success. How can employed women resolve the question of conflicting expectations in order to achieve and maintain this necessary, empowering commitment? The following steps have proven helpful for many:

A. Values Clarification

Engage in honest self appraisal,here.
Ask yourself:
What really matters to you?
What for you is truly important in life?
How do you measure your life's success?
What really counts?

Identify your personal values and then clarify your value system by ranking the importance of the various considerations that enter into your life decisions. What concerns are paramount? What do you most want from your life? How important are each of the following: things, relationships, respect, prestige, power, nurturance, affection, tranquility, responsibility, and beauty. What do you really enjoy? What is worth knocking yourself out for? What would you like to be remembered for?

Next, assess whether your daily use of your limited time and energy is consistant with the values system you've articulated for yourself. Do your choices reflect your values? Are some concerns overly dominant to the exclusion of others? If so, where do the imbalances lie?

B. Think about how you think.

Our emotional state is largely a function of how we choose to interpret what happens in our life. For this reason, recognizing self-defeating cognitive patterns and changing them can be a powerful way of reducing our negative emotional reactions to stressful events.

Detect, examine, and challenge irrational
beliefs that fuel doubt and guilt.
Can you be everything to everyone?
Does the selfless martyr really help her
family the most?
Does the workplace really demand total
loyalty and perfection?

C. Network with peers to underscore the legitimacy of dual values and trying to break with traditionally segregated divisions of labor. The American family is clearly in a time of transition. The traditional family with the sole-breadwinner father and the "at home" mother is rapidly vanishing. Yet many women suffer from feeling that they alone are attempting to forge new ways of combining involvement in the work sphere with homemaking and childrearing responsibilities. Confirming that you are certainly not the only one feeling overwhelmed can reduce internalized blame and feelings of inadequacy (we know from research that there are differences in the ways that men and women make attributions for failure...while men are more likely to point the finger at their immediate situation or not expending enough effort, women all too often see failure as proof of their longstanding incompetence or stupidity).

D. Work collaboratively with other family members to clarify your communal sense of purpose. Try to develop a family consensus about how nurturing and income-generating responsibilities will be shared. Discuss your mutual goals and options, and try to explore alternatives imaginatively. Uncover any hidden attitudes about employed women that may be powerful barriers to family success. Be aware that husbands, parents, and in-laws that believe that employed women are necessarily damaging to their children, can seriously undermine a mother's ability to juggle multiple roles. Sometimes, open, nondefensive discussion can foster greater broadmindedness. Other times, simply recognizing how these family dynamics are operating can make them less intrusive and less damaging.

E. Stop torturing yourself with unrealistic fantasies! Don't engage in futile comparisons of fantasy and reality. For example, comparing your real life with its real frustrations (given your actual choice to work and meet family obligations) with a fantasy ideal (For example, a vague romantic idea of how you would function without work obligations outside the home if you were given the chance or if you made that choice.)

F. Keep informed about research findings on the effects of maternal employment on children, mothers, and fathers. Be an educated consumer of such information and recognize the limitations of particular studies which may be misleadingly presented in the media. Learn to recognize distorted, overly simplified conclusions when you encounter them.

The greatest obstacles to this necessary commitment derive from prevalent critical and challenging social attitudes. Three sets of assumptions are particularly threatening:

1. Dual career couples are harming their children
2. Career women are placing themselves in psychological &/or physical jeopardy
3. Dual career husbands are burdened and deprived

Dual career couples frequently feel defensive because of these widespread negative conceptualizations. Popular myths about the harmfulness of the dual career lifestyle foster maladaptive guilt, anxiety, alienation, and anger. Examining each set of myths in light

of the relevant objective evidence helps dual career couples resolve their ambivalence and make a stronger commitment.

Many dual career partners have an extremely difficult time with the popular belief that their lifestyle compromises their children's well being. Although most objective developmental research strongly counters prevailing negative attitudes toward maternal employment, showing few differences between children whose mothers are employed and those who are unemployed, and some which actually show the advantages of having a mother who works outside the home, the public views working mothers as harmful to their children. This misconception must be corrected if couples are to resolve their ambivalence about pursuing a dual career lifestyle.

A 1986 study on 699 families with children in grades 1, 3, & 5 found that children with employed mothers scored higher on IQ tests and were rated higher by teachers on academic achievement. They appeared more verbally fluent, more autonomous, and better behaved in school. It seems likely that women who feel good about themselves come closer to doing their best as mothers. A rewarding job enhances self esteem, which in turn enhances parenting.

Working mothers provide positive role models for their children. Their daughters tend to be more ambitious and confident. The fact that wives with careers frequently have *chosen* to continue working after becoming mothers helps to blur the distinction between work and play. In easing this separation, they redress years of compartmentalization in living created by industrialization. These mothers portray work positively, as something which is exciting, stimulating, enriching, challenging, and even fun! What a lesson for children to learn.

In short, children in dual career families aren't being deprived! In fact, a recent study by United Media Enterprises found that dual career parents are more likely to read and draw with their children on a regular basis, are more likely to supervise schoolwork, take them to special events, and talk to them about school and friends. Furthermore, use of child care helps to teach children how to use a broader, varied support system.

3. Switch from evaluating and judging yourself to describing and accepting yourself. This makes it easier to take full responsibility for your life. There's no one right way to live. Comparing yourself to others is often self-defeating, especially because you never know "the whole story" of their lives.

CONTROL
Methods of Change

Enhancing your sense of CONTROL requires recognizing how your personal choices dictate outcomes.

1. Responsible decision-making begins with the formulation of goals and the development of specific plans of action to influence your life.

A. Set realistic expectations for yourself. Don't base your self esteem on being perfect...juggling career and family requires compromise. Shed dispensible household tasks. Relax housekeeping standards and create an efficiently cleanable home. Evaluate all new household purchases in terms of their future maintenance needs. Cut your workload whenever possible!

B. Don't overemphasize unimportant details. Complete assignments in a reasonable way within a realistic timetable. Avoid perfectionism by (1) becoming aware of this tendency and (2) perspective-taking (i.e., does this detail make a big difference in the "grand scheme" of things?).

2. Transform stressful events by recognizing your role in shaping your emotional response to them. Feelings originate in our interpretations of events, not in the events themselves. By changing our view of events, we can alter how we feel. This can increase your sense of personal powerfulness.

3. Develop an assertive behavioral style. This is necessary for setting limits and avoiding overextension. Practice saying no in a firm, nonapologetic voice when turning down an unreasonable demand.

4. Take charge of scheduling your time. Organize your life by allowing time for careful planning. Make diligent use of household "to do" and shopping lists and other time management tools to keep abreast of projects. Instruct other family members in the use of communal, running shopping lists, so they become accustomed to noting whenever they use the last of some household product or food.

A. Don't procrastinate. Recognize this "fear of failure" game as the waster of time it is. Examine why you may avoid testing your real abilities by delaying tasks until the last moment ("if I'd had the time, the job would be perfect, but I waited and so was Do you use procrastination to make boring work more exciting? How else could you add interest to your worklife?

B. Focus- be where you are (home vs. work)
center on activites at hand.
Compartmentalize your life!

C. Use a Daily List to outline your specific tasks for the next workday. Complete this list at the end of each work day.

5. Search for and create support systems to meet your needs. Delegate! Share responsibility! Learn how to ask for help effectively!

6. Use compensatory self improvement strategies to enhance your feelings of control when external realities are limiting you in other ways. Define an area of deficiency and embark on a personal growth

program. Acquire a new skill!

CONFIDENCE
Methods of Change

Increasing your CONFIDENCE involves recognizing one's potential for coping and becoming more future and change oriented. Seeing change and new demands as potential adventure requires an ability to tolerate risk and failure.

1. Address and change irrational beliefs that underlie fear of failure and avoidance of risk-taking. Do you feel you have to be perfectly competent in everything you do? Do you expect yourself to cope perfectly with every demand made of you? Do you think others expect this perfection from you? Do you expect perfection from others?

2. As you clarify your short term and long term goals, recognize the need for flexibility and the alternative paths to achievement of your most valued long term objectives. Don't allow yourself to get stuck believing that everything must go according to your original plan. Accept the inevitability of surprise!

3. Accept the notion that total lack of stress is both boring and deadly. You want your life to change! View your life as a flowing process, rather than as a linear path to a specific destination. Ask yourself how you would like to be remembered after death (for impersonal achievements or for a shared style of living and interacting, and facing challenges to grow and change)

4. Recall your major experiences with failure. Think about how you have been shaped by your failures. Learn to identify what you have learned from failure experiences. Notice how failure often stimulates more growth and development than success.

5. Create positive self-fulfilling prophecies. Expect the best. Reduce anticipatory anxiety and be careful not to sabotage your own communications by broadcasting expectations of disapppointment or criticism. Convey the notion that you're a capapble adult woman, and others will respect you more.

COOPERATION
Methods of Change

Increasing the level of COOPERATION within a family requires a climate of trust and caring.

1. Establish patterns of open and direct communication. Develop self expression skills that allow family members to discover shared areas of interest or dissatisfaction. Sharing allows a family to function as a system that understands itself.

2. Develop family members' capacity for empathy. Resolving conflicts optimally requires mutual understanding and respect for another's viewpoint.

3. Explicitly recognize the value of compromise. Praise the discovery of mutually beneficial problem solutions. Discuss the value of working to the communal as well as the personal good. Temper competitiveness among members by encouraging children to measure themselves against their own, internal standards, rather than through comparisons with siblings.

4. Develop a flexible method for sharing the family's work. Assess members' abilities and preferences on a periodic basis, in order to match persons and jobs appropriately, fairly, and kindly. Allow all members to participate actively in decision-making about task assignments. Occasionally review the entire household's division of labor as a family, with an emphasis on positive acknowledgement of responsible, successful performance of duties.

Since this seems to be such a major source of dissatisfaction among women, and since the ubiquitous complaint is that men "don't do their share", it's important to consider ways in which women may be unwittingly maintaining this unwanted status quo. Women need to thoughtfully consider their feelings about sharing their role as "household manager", and the control that comes with it. If having the power to set unilateral standards for cleanliness is very important, the trade-off usually comes in the form of greater responsibility for homemaking activities. Women need to decide if they really want to/need to be the ultimate authority on housekeeping, the principal organizer, and feel more personally responsible for the state of the household. Candid assessment may reveal complelling personal benefits that were previously unrecognized. In this case, on balance, the extra work is well worth it. If the traditional role is not attractive enough, the woman may feel freer to share all portions of it (including the components that are more intrinsically rewarding).

Rigid scorekeeping and pursuit of strict "equality" with regard to household chores is generally dissatisfying and tends to create family tension. Aiming for "equity in the long run" is generally more workable. And trying to empathize with male partners may help women be more patient. In some senses it probably is "easier" for women to take responsibility for many traditional cleaning chores because they've been socialized to feel good about doing so. In childhood, these activities were defined as "play" for girls, which may make them seem a bit less onerous later on. The reality is that while today's women were being prepared to run households by their playtime activities, today's men were being prepared for life in the major leagues. Whose education was more relevant to real life in the 80's?

5. Support traditions which enhance the family's sense of identity and specialness. Create a variety of shared memories and emphasize their importance with a concrete record (e.g., photos, saved calendar notations, films, etc.). Special outings and shared travel excursions are particularly salient features of memory, and

consequently should be a family priority.

6. Encourage members to see the family as a shared creation, for which all are equally responsible. Avoid having mom seen as orchestrating family affairs and therefore "in charge" of the group and everyone's happiness within. Allow your children's father to share responsibility for nurturance.

The preceding suggestions have worked for many women, and some may work for you as well. I encourage you to consider the various changes we've discussed today, and decide which changes you might wish to try.